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ABSTRACT

With the large numbers of African American children who are not successful in school, more attention needs to be devoted to developing methods and processes by which they can effectively learn, achieve, and be empowered. The performance statistics for African American students in public schools are alarming. Their suspension rates are high, and 20 percent of them are likely to drop out of school before graduation. Educational researchers and practitioners repeatedly compare African American children to their European American counterparts and find them lower in achievement, IQ, reading, writing, and socio-cultural areas. This deficiency lies in a system of education that refuses to adapt itself to differences among students. African American childrens' learning styles are different from their European American counterparts, but not deficient. Studies have revealed that African American children learn from styles that are in concert with African perspective that involves social/affective emphases, communalism, expressiveness, as well as movement and harmony. The purpose of this paper is to discuss various learning styles and suggest strategies for improving the academic success of African American students. (Contains 31 references.) (Author)

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Running head: LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES

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Teaching African American Children Through Cultural Learning Styles to Improve Academic Success

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Abstract

With the large numbers of African American children who are not successful in school, more attention needs to be devoted to developing methods and processes by which they can effectively learn, achieve, and be empowered. The performance statistics for African American students in public schools are alarming. Their suspension rates are high, and 20 percent of them are likely to drop out of school before graduation (Nielson, 1991). Educational researchers and practitioners repeatedly compare African American children to their European American counterparts and find them lower in achievement, IQ, reading, writing, and socio-cultural areas. This deficiency approach to the education of African American students ignores the philosophy, which is to teach from the knowledge base of the learner. Rather than a fault of the students, the deficiency lies in a system of education that refuses to adapt itself to differences among students. African American childrens' learning styles are different from their European American counterparts, but not deficient. Studies have revealed that African American children learn from styles that are in concert with African perspective that involves social/affective emphases, communalism, expressiveness, as well as movement and harmony. The purpose of this paper is to discuss various learning styles and suggest strategies for improving the academic success of African American students.

Teaching African American Children Through Cultural Learning Styles to Improve Academic Success

African American children have been the center of attention for many years as it relates to their underachievement in the academic setting. It has been the effort of many Afrocentric scholars, along with their cohorts, to provide knowledge and understanding of the cognitive and developmental perspective of African American children. Although there has been research discovering the learning styles of African American children and how society impacts their achievement, certainly more needs to be done. An important question that needs answering is why is it taking so much to understand this culture and how they learn? In the author's opinion, the answers are in twofold: 1.) there appears to be a lack of will for some to understand the culture and 2.) the stigma that has been associated with being black in the educational system. To be black in America is to be more than simply a person of color. The African American experience incorporates the collective experience unique to African Americans, encompassing racism, language, role expectations, education, and socioeconomic status (Sattler, 1992). These are barriers that African Americans are forced to deal with and yet overcome. Although all of the experiences are important to discuss, education is the key issue that can serve as a powerful weapon against these experiences.

Cultural Learning Styles

With the large numbers of African American children who are not successful in school, more attention should be devoted to developing methods and processes by which they can learn effectively, achieve, and be empowered. The construct of learning style seems to be an appropriate one for studying instructional processes. The first construct is

that learning style is an important dimension to consider in a child's school experience (Polce, 1987). Secondly, learning style can be defined as a way of perceiving, conceptualizing, and problem-solving. Finally, learning style is a preference for the way of interacting with and responding to the environment (Polce, 1987). Some learning styles of African American children are characterized as patterns that express African American culture (Hale-Benson, 1986, Kwate, 2001). Boykin (1983) suggested that African Americans have a learning style that stems from the African culture, which includes movement, orality, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, social time, spirituality, and harmony. Boykin (1983) suggested that if African American students were exposed to instructional materials that incorporated these African perspectives, then there might be an increase in academic success. The main focus of this perspective is to have students learn through activities that require interaction with others, people-oriented activities. Ladson-Billings (1994) proposed the use of culturally relevant instruction as a method of teaching African American students and improving their school success. She defined this type of instruction as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Ladson-Billings (1994) stated that at the center of culturally relevant instruction is the culture of the learner. In order to develop an instructional program that is relevant to students, educators need to understand the core beliefs and experiences of their culture. The National Commission on Teaching and American's Future (1996) proposed that teachers must understand students and their many pathways to learning as deeply as they comprehend the subject matter and teaching methods. Teaching based on the learner's

culture not only addresses the cognitive aspects of learning but the affective as well. Students whose culture is respected are empowered to learn because the negative self-image that accompanies the rejection of their experience is eliminated. In addition, an appreciation of what they already know can motivate further learning by validating the idea that the students can learn.

Communalism and Cooperative Learning

Among the possible dimensions of leaning styles that describe those of African American children, communalism and cooperation have been delineated (Bonner, 2000; Diller, 1999; Hale-Benson, 1986). The suggestion that African American children learn effectively with others, around others, and in interaction with others is consistent throughout the literature. Cooperation is an important dimension in African American children's learning style. Research has found that cooperative learning, in which small, heterogeneous ability groups work together on learning tasks and activities, are particularly effective for African American students (Slavin & Oickle, 1981)

Slavin (1977) and Slavin & Oickle (1981) found a greater increase in African American students' academic performance when cooperative learning groups were used. When teachers used instructional techniques that involved more stimulus variety, greater verve, rhythmic, and verbal interactions, the African American students performed better than they did when traditional techniques were used (Boykin, 1982; Piestrup, 1973). Willis (1989) found that involving movement, particularly rhythmic movement (as in creating rap songs of science or social studies facts or using self-talk in working through math problems) is an appropriate type of instruction for facilitating learning and understanding.

Social interaction and opportunities for social learning in peer groups and cross-age groups should be encouraged along with cooperative learning groups. Hale-Benson (1986) stressed peer tutoring and small group learning often is more effective than the one-on-one teacher-student instruction that is commonly prescribed by educators for low achievers.

Given that children's critical years of development are between the ages of 2 and 5, it is essential that they begin developing interactions with peers early in order to acquire adequate social development skills that may enhance learning. It has been stated that during the preschool years, children gradually increase the amount of contacts with peers and establish effective peer relation (Brook, Zheng, Whiteman, &Brook, 2001; Howes, 1987). However, the developmental progression of social interaction, demonstrated in the literature, apparently suggests that the outlined patterns of communalism typified by African American learners are gradual and not evident until school-age level. Research reveals that at the school-age level, cooperative skills can be attributed to improved communicative skills; increased cognitive skills that enable children to attune themselves to the roles of others; increased opportunities for peer interactions; and expanded motor competencies that permit participation in joint activities (Brendt & Perry, 1986; Griffin, 2001; Vander-Zanden, 1993).

Watkins (2002) investigated the development of the communalism/cooperative learning style among African American children. She explored the developmental nature of 44 preschool age children on help-seeking behaviors. Results indicated that regardless of age and kind of activity involved, young African American children tend to go to teachers for social help and peers for academic help. These findings suggest that

cooperative learning environments and peer-tutoring structures appear to be developmentally appropriate at this level and imply that African American preschoolers are ready and willing to work in cooperative learning structures. Because of this successful structure, classrooms would do well in providing more opportunities for peers to take responsibility for academic pursuits. White (1994) pointed out that outmoded teaching strategies such as lectures and independent seatwork should be replaced with structures that allow African American students to work together; however, teachers need to be on hand to lend assistance in case of social help needs.

Strategies for Academic Success

Early childhood, birth through grade three, is a time of rapid growth and development. Research has shown explicitly that young children go through a long period where play and hands on experiences are vital to learning and is essential to later success in more complex situations. Early learning seems so simple that it is tempting to devalue it as merely a child's recreation rather than recognize it as an extremely important time to build a rich understanding of the world (New Horizon for Learning, 2002). Therefore, it is important that families, caregivers, and schools be prepared to understand and support this critical stage of growth for children in our society and be sure that programs and schools meet the special needs of very young children.

Most children are very adaptable and feel natural in any comfortable environment that a parent may set. Parents can play a very active role in developing a child's behavior. Diamond (2001) suggested various ways that parents can help provide an enhanced environment for their child to have academic success, such as: provide social and emotional support-love, encouragement, and warmth; allow social interaction for a

significant percentage of activities; promote the development of a broad range of interest that are mental, physical, social and emotional; give the child an opportunity to choose his or her own activities, give the child the chance to assess the results of his or her efforts and modify them; and allow the child to become an active participant rather than a passive observer.

Strickland (1994) suggested strategies that may increase literacy for low and high achieving students. She indicated that literacy should start early and continue throughout life. Educators should implement strategies and techniques that allow children to demonstrate what they do know. In addition, educators should create a learning environment that gives children confidence that they can learn and let them know by your actions that you believe in them. Literacy learning should be used to help children make meanings out of their world and should take place through active involvement. Plan instructional activities that involve children in a high degree of critical thinking; help students use talk to mediate what they are attempting to understand; engage students in study groups, collaborative groups, partner activities and research groups rather than attempting to keep students quiet, plan activities where talk is channeled and used along with reading and writing, especially to promote active listening will improve students' performance both academically and socially. Literacy learning is influenced by one's language, background and social context. Teachers should select instructional materials that will enable the student to build and expand their language and culture with a view towards helping them understand and value their heritage and respect the heritage of others.

The National Council on Educating Black Children (NCEBC) designed a Blueprint for Action III that incorporates everyone that should and is involved in a child's educational life. They have developed ways in which everyone will have an integral part in leading African American children to academic success. Parents and Families are encouraged to create a home environment that communicates and builds respect for and interest in learning and education. Students are encouraged to become active and empowered learners and participate in all activities that ensure success and result in high school graduation. Teachers are encouraged to develop and demonstrate effective teaching strategies in all aspects of instruction and serve as role models for the children. In addition, they should recruit and retain other African American teachers that are devoted to enhancing the educational growth of all children.

Conclusion

The performance statistics for African American students in public schools are disturbing. Educational researchers have offered various ways in which African American students should be taught and retain information. Among the descriptions of learning styles that characterize African American children, communalism/cooperative learning has been presented. Research has supported the notion that African American students utilize a learning style that is different, but not deficient. If presented with information that incorporates instructional materials that reflect their culture and heritage through the use of Boykin's (1983) dimensions, there will be an increase in their academic success. Furthermore, African American students will successfully increase their self-concept and this will enable them to conquer social pessimism, complete high school, and become proud productive citizen. Although, these particular learning styles

have been found suitable to all cultures, African American children will benefit more from the styles that incorporate group learning as well as specific cultural activities.

School and learning environments must work for all students and should reflect the culture of the communities they serve. In addition, educators should implement positive and effective structures at very early stages so that no child will be left behind in the educational process.

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